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ABSTRACT

Globalization is an evolving concept characterized by economic, technological, social, and political dimensions. Vocational education and training (VET) practitioners and the VET system must make more conscious efforts to lead thinking about the social dimension of globalization. The mission of Australian VET today is largely couched in economic terms--to ensure a skilled work force capable of helping the country's industries become globally competitive. In Australia, much of the debate about globalization has focused on economics and technology, and the social and political dimensions of globalization have largely been side-stepped. The Australian education and training system has worked very hard to ensure that technology is pressed to the service of VET rather than falling for the trap of technological determinism. The challenge is not so much to invest in the technologies but to more quickly and effectively apply the technologies for the purposes of vocational learning and for using them to transact VET business. The following issues related to the social dimensions of globalization remain vitally important to the development and delivery of VET: access; Australian cultural identity; and community. Australia's VET practitioners and leaders must support a community-building purpose for VET and work to enhance the stock of social capital in their communities. (MN)

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS TO ANTA NET*WORKING 99 CONFERENCE "VET ONLINE: FROM LEFT FIELD TO CENTRE STAGE", MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA, 1 - 3 SEPTEMBER 1999

RE-IMPOSING OUR WILL ON THE INFORMATION ECONOMY

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Globalisation is a multi-dimensional and evolving concept. As we grapple to make sense of it all, we have little choice but to use existing ways of thinking to discover new ways of thinking and understanding globalisation. We are pulling ourselves up by our intellectual bootstraps. Therefore, we commonly divide up this interconnected and holistic concept into four dimensions: economic, technological, social and political. I fear that social and political considerations are increasingly obscured by the economic and technological considerations.

As Anthony Giddens has noted, globalisation is not an 'out there' thing of grand world theories, although it is often presented to us this way, as if its evolution is somehow inevitable, beyond our will to shape and influence. Globalisation is an 'in here' thing. My basic proposition today is that globalisation is something we can and must shape and we can only do so if we pay attention to each of these four dimensions.

I have been asked to focus mainly on the social dimension of globalisation and to explore some of the implications for our work in vocational education and training (VET).

The political implications for citizenship, for democracy, for the nation-state and for vocational learning are equally important but time does not permit me to explore them here. A recent paper by John McIntyre and Nicky Solomon of the Research Centre for VET at the University of Technology Sydney on the policy environment of work-based learning is an excellent starting point.[1]

However, before going global, let me start from a different, 'in here' place. I want to emphasise the need for leadership in VET. This needs to take two forms:

- the leadership role of VET practitioners; and
- the leadership role of the VET system as a whole.

Teachers and trainers in VET do not often think of themselves as leaders. They think of senior managers as leaders. They think of political elites as leaders. They think of academics as leaders. They think of industry representatives as leaders.

They think of themselves as pragmatic doers of things which their leaders map out. They think of themselves as users of knowledge generated elsewhere. They imagine themselves as people who just get on with the task of meeting the needs of learners the best way they know how within the resources available to them, usually with a minimum of fuss.

These industrial-age mindsets must be discarded in the Knowledge Age. The entire VET system, with all its structures and policies and protocols and frameworks and guidelines, rests on the foundation of vocational learning. No learning, no VET.

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[1] John McIntyre and Nicky Solomon (1999), "The policy environment of work-based learning: globalisation, institutions and the workplace", paper to be delivered at the International Conference on *Researching Learning and Work*, organised by the School of Continuing Education, Leeds University, September 10-13.

VET teachers and trainers, because their essential business is vocational learning, are the knowledge-creators in these new times. They are the ones creating the real value. They are the innovators and the pioneers. They know through reflection on their professional experience if, when and how new learning technologies facilitate vocational learning for different learners in different learning contexts within different forms of occupational knowledge. They are becoming the new VET professionals, leading and managing the transition from the business of training to the business of learning.

VET practitioners are clearly accountable to their employers, to their students and to Australian industry for the quality of the vocational learning they organise and manage. But I believe that they must exercise an additional accountability – accountability to their communities. Communities trust educators in ways they do not trust used car salespeople, the media or politicians. Communities look to teachers – be they school teachers, adult and community education tutors, university staff or VET practitioners – for leadership to help them and their children make a successful transition to the Knowledge Age. This trust persists despite the general decline of deference to professional experts discernible throughout society.

If VET practitioners are to assume the mantle of intelligent and thoughtful leaders and thus warrant the community's trust in them – and I argue that they must - then they have some special responsibilities. Their biggest single practical challenge is to develop a truly professional understanding of the ways different learning technologies work for different learners in different contexts and with different occupational content.

To do this, it is not enough simply to acquire a bundle of technical skills although this is a pre-requisite for learning leadership in the Knowledge Age.

A leader is someone who has a point of view about the future and is able to convince others through reasoned argument or political acumen to their point of view. If they are to fulfil their responsibilities as professionals and as leaders, VET practitioners have a responsibility to relentlessly search for the fullest possible understanding of the implications of globalisation - to look beyond the world of VET to the other education sectors and to look even further to the wider environment to understand where and how they can hone their point of view about the future they are creating.

On the question of the leadership by the VET system as a whole, I think we can be very proud (although never complacent) with the progress the system has made and the national contribution VET is making now and plans to make. Other education sectors are increasingly looking to VET, keen to learn from us. Through the excellent work of the EdNA-VET Advisory Group there have been some outstanding achievements, including the development of preferred technical standards, various innovative professional development strategies such as LearnScope and Flexible Delivery Fellowships and also the Toolbox initiative to accelerate the development of on-line content and applications. The recently completed *National Framework for Collaboration in Flexible Learning*, which builds on the achievements of the past five years, will take us all forward nationally over the next five years.

These national achievements have been made possible essentially because of national collaboration. VET has been a smart sector. It has acted with foresight, understanding

that the collaborative dynamic of networks, partnerships, and joint ventures is a main organising principle in the Knowledge Age.

In addition to this leadership within the education and training sector, VET has also shown leadership to many other industries grappling with the implications of globalisation for their human resources.

Having made this general point about the continuing need for VET practitioners and the VET system to exercise leadership in flexible learning for the Knowledge Age let me now move on to explore the dimensions of globalisation. My point is that VET practitioners and the VET system need to make more conscious efforts to lead along the social dimension of globalisation.

FROM AGE TO ECONOMY

The Dark Ages, the Middle Ages, the Agricultural Age, the Industrial Age. The Information Economy.

Has Australia unconsciously or consciously allowed a major historical period slide from being an Age to an Economy? In using 'Economy' are we endorsing the view of some that there is no such thing as society, only the economy? Do we think that globalisation is just about economic change and all its other dimensions are simply derivative?

Our choice to describe the new era as the Information Economy contrasts with, for example, Ireland which chose to drive for an Information Society which is defined as *...a society in which economic and cultural life is critically dependent on information and communications technologies and where people get the full benefits of that technology at work, at home and at play.*[2] To the Irish Commission, the Information Society is the goal, facilitated by a global telecommunications infrastructure and the emergence of a global economy.

In Australia we side-step these questions by talking about the Information Economy on the one hand and, on the other, the need for a Learning Society. I think this is avoiding the issue.

This is not linguistic nit-picking. The language we choose to use always reflects our cultural values. By using 'Economy' rather than 'Age' or 'Society' to describe the new era being shaped by the forces of globalisation, we are sending the message that what matters is the economy, that personal, working and political relationships which are being re-shaped by globalisation are essentially economic relationships and that the social and political dimensions of globalisation are simply trickle down impacts of economic and technological imperatives.

Let me offer just three home-grown examples in passing.

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2 Information Society Commission of Ireland

- The rise of One Nation was certainly fuelled by community response to the economic impacts of globalisation, but it was and is a social and political phenomenon, as well as an economic one.

- The explosion of Internet gambling is a social and political issue, not simply an economic or technological one.

- The extent to which VET buys into the question of Net censorship and how it deals with Internet privacy matters depend on our social perspective, especially our point of view about the capacity of learners for moral judgement as well as on broad political currents.

If VET was just any old service industry, then perhaps it would be legitimate for us to be concerned only with the economic and technological implications of globalisation. But even this argument is reputed when we consider the growing movement towards corporate citizenship and responsible industry, and when we think about how Australians have responded to the changes in the banking and finance industry or their views about the community service obligations of Telstra.

However, while VET as a whole is certainly a vital service industry, publicly owned TAFE institutions are more than that. They are not simply economic or labour market institutions, no matter how governments talk up the training market dynamic. Despite a decade of reform, they remain an essential and integral part of our education system which is, in turn, one of the fundamental institutions of civil society along with the family, social movements, the church and voluntary associations.

Civil society, working in the contested space between the public sphere and the private sphere, is the place where democratic attitudes and cultural beliefs are developed, where values such as tolerance and fairness and reciprocity are fostered, where what it means to be an Australian comes to be understood.

I wonder if VET has chosen the phrase Information Economy rather than choosing the Information Society because we think we are made more politically relevant by aligning ourselves with economic rather than social issues. In the current political environment, this may be a politically smart if short-sighted position to have taken in order to gain support from industry and government stakeholders. But it holds its own dangers. What does it do for our relevance for our learners who are anxious about and often disillusioned by economic reform and fearful of the consequences Information Economy. I am convinced that an excessive focus on the economic and technological dimensions of globalisation limits our view about what learners need to know and do with information and communications technologies and fails to serve and develop communities.

ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS

While it was not always the case, the VET mission today is largely couched in economic terms – to ensure a skilled workforce capable of helping our industries become globally competitive. Our daily interactions are shaped by the framework of labour market

economics. Consequently, our understanding of the economic dimensions of globalisation are quite sophisticated.

We know because of our day-to-day work that labour markets are changing and that structures organised around fixed jobs and work hierarchies were designed for a more stable world. Enterprises are now looking to create more fluid organisations built around team and group arrangements, projects, portfolios and small unit structures. Increasingly, workforces are being structured on a core worker / peripheral worker / interchangeable worker model described by Charles Handy.[3]

The traditional expectation of stable work roles and responsibilities, focused around narrow job descriptions, are being replaced by an expectation that employees will be able to respond to the changing work environment, assume broader roles and responsibilities, and will hold a wider portfolio of capabilities. Our job is to help citizens make these labour force transitions.

We know that employer investment in training is declining and that service industries are steadily replacing manufacturing industries at the core of our economy. We are beginning to understand the implications for our work of the rise of labour hire firms and outsourcing. We are still reluctant to accept that traditional apprenticeships are in decline, probably terminally. We know intellectually that training is being de-institutionalised but we are deeply ambivalent about the rise of fully on-the-job training. We have not yet come to grips which the idea that training will be replaced by learning. We vaguely hope that a marketing strategy for VET and more flexible delivery, especially that made possible by information and communications technologies can turn this around.

We are still looking at the labour market from an economic perspective but, as Nobel Laureate and Emeritus Professor of Economics from MIT, Robert M. Solow says: *...the labour market is a social as much as an economic institution - and the interaction between human beings cannot be interpreted in the same way as the supply and demand for dead fish.*[4]

We also experience the new economics being played out in our own industry: Individual VET staff will need to take more responsibility for their own learning. The VET workforce will become more differentiated. Less security in employment within VET appears unstoppable, at least in the short term until the consequences become apparent.

From this professional base of labour market economics we in VET are coming to understand the broader economic implications of globalisation. The rapid growth of world trade, foreign direct investment, and cross-border financial transactions, made possible by electronic money, have been the main forces in increasing the globalisation of the world economy.[5] This growth of global markets, accompanied by fierce international

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3 Handy, C., (1996), *Beyond Certainty*, Arrow Book Limited, p.25

4 Solow, R (1990) *The Labor Market as a Social Institution*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

5 Lee, E., (1996), "Globalisation and employment: Is anxiety justified?", *International Labour Review*, Vol. 135, No. 5, p.185

competition, has changed the business environment for a large portion of Australian industry. To become or remain globally competitive, more enterprises will have to adjust their mindset and change their strategies and practices. Our job is to help companies make this transition while making the same leap ourselves in the way our training institutions are organised and managed, but doing it faster than the industries we serve.

We know that nations and enterprises., including VET enterprises, which wish to prosper can no longer insulate themselves from international forces and trends.

As a service industry we know we will have to be as fleet-of-foot as the industries we support if we are to maintain our market position in the global training and development market. The danger is that we are too slow in making the necessary adaptations.

TECHNOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS

I don't intend to canvass here all the technological dimensions of globalisation – almost everyone here today would have a better appreciation of the technological complexities than I do. I do want however to highlight four aspects.

First, the Australian education and training system has worked very hard to ensure that technology is pressed to the service of vocational learning rather than falling for the trap of technological determinism – that the technologies drive our pedagogical practice. This is a commendable and enlightened philosophical position and one which should continue despite the cargo cult inclinations of some.

Second, State and Territory VET agencies and individual training providers have begun to understand the absolutely essential question of inter-operability of technologies and achievements such as the national preferred technical standards for learning technologies in VET need to be commended highly and widely taken-up.

Third, State and Territory VET agencies have made a truly forward-thinking and courageous decision to pool some of their resources to invest jointly in national infrastructure, including technological infrastructure. This is a real breakthrough because no individual agency or institution can go it alone in technology investment for VET and expect to make the grade nationally or internationally. We still have a long way to go in overcoming technological parochialism, but at least we are now on the right track. The challenge now is to fast track the national collaborations.

Finally, the nature of work in all education and training sectors, and in the industry sectors VET serves have been and will continue to be transformed by the introduction of new technologies. We know now that there are at least five important consequences for the way we use technologies in our VET work.

1) There is now a general demand for all VET staff to be competent users of appropriate technology.

2) There is a demand for specialists who have the competencies to apply cutting edge technology to organise and facilitate vocational learning.

3) There is a demand for specialists who can manage the use of technology efficiently and effectively to establish systems and to service the needs of VET staff who are less conversant with technology.

4) There is a demand for specialist services to install and maintain the technology based services within VET.

5) There is a demand for multi-skilled people who can provide services across all of the above.

Our challenge is not so much in investing in the technologies, (although many here may take a different view), but to more quickly and effectively apply the technologies for the purposes of vocational learning and for using them to transact VET business.

SOCIAL DIMENSIONS

Much of the debate about globalisation has focussed on these two dimensions – economics and technology . Where we have addressed the question of the social and cultural dimension we have consistently stressed two points in our rhetoric. Because our practice falls far short of our rhetoric they are worth stressing again, and again and again.

ACCESS

The question of access continues to be vitally important. The first priority under the *Strategic Framework for the Information Economy*, issued in December 1998 by the National Office of the Information Economy is to *...maximise opportunities for* ***all*** *Australians to benefit from the information economy.*

The broad social danger is presented in terms of a digital divide – the growing gap between the information-rich and the information-poor. Evidence to date indicates a direct positive correlation between household income and high household penetration of the Internet.

Some argue that a digital divide it is not a problem, it is simply market forces and will work itself out consistent with the principles of survival of the fittest. More credibly, some suggest that the divide may diminish as costs of computers and telecommunications generally fall.

If we accept that a growing digital divide is socially and politically dangerous, and it is unlikely to disappear over the next five years, then the next question is what public action might be required to close the gap.

David Moschella and Robert Atkinson in their recent book *Universal Access to the Internet: What's the Role for the Government?* suggest that there are a number of ways we could think about this.

On the one hand we could argue that the emerging digital economy is exacerbating societal inequalities, and that some kind of personal or household financial subsidy system is needed to ensure universal Internet access.

On the other hand, we could argue that government should do little or nothing to help lower-income people utilise the Internet.

Moschella and Atkinson argue, rightly I think, that neither of these approaches should be pursued. Rather, they suggest that positive market forces should be complemented with specifically targeted investments to ensure public access to the Internet in publicly accessible places. The specific targets should include public libraries, community centres and public education systems.

This is the strategy that Australia has theoretically adopted. The *Strategic Framework for the Information Economy* identifies four principles underpinning Australian efforts for the Information Economy, the first of which includes

> *All Australians—wherever they live and work, and whatever their economic circumstances—need to be able to access the information economy at sufficient bandwidth and affordable cost.*

Thus we see efforts around Australia to establish widespread community access through publicly accessible places including community learning centres and TAFE Institutes, with a special emphasis on rural communities.

While these are sound developments, and the overarching principle is sound, I have three concerns about our current efforts to ensure affordable universal Internet access via publicly accessible spaces.

The first concern is with the assumption by some governments that if they invest in the establishment of community access to the Internet in various forms then within one or two years such service centres should become self-funding through commercial activities. This is simply not realistic in many communities. While sound business planning will assist financial viability, if low income and low Internet usage are directly correlated, then moving to a fully user-pays system of community access defeats the original equity objective of their establishment.

The second concern relates to the way the VET system has failed so far to take a significant advocacy role in ensuring reduced communication costs for VET, especially those arising from the ISDN regime and ensuring that Australian VET has access to adequate bandwidth at a reasonable price. We have a moral obligation, in my view, to work together with the other education and training sectors to advance this common cause, rather than leaving it to those with a vested interest in ensuring the opposite outcome. We must use our market power to do so.

The third concern arises from some early research indications that gaps in general Web access and use between African-Americans and whites in the United States appear to be driven not by overall access opportunities but by whether or not there is a computer in the

home. This means that we need to undertake and keep an eye on research on whether the publicly accessible space strategy is the right one to minimise the digital divide.

Before leaving this question of access I would also like to make comment on the digital divide in access for people with disabilities. I will take as given our commitment to extending vocational learning opportunities to all, and that this commitment includes people with disabilities so I will concentrate here on what we might need to do.

As Cynthia Waddell has recently noted, ...

> *The transformation of the Internet from a text-based medium to a robust multi-media environment has created a crisis – a growing digital divide in access for people with disabilities. Previously, people with disabilities were able to access the Internet with their screen readers audibly reading aloud the text on a web page. Today, graphical web pages are a barrier if they do not incorporate accessible web design.*
>
> *...But the impact is not limited to people with visual and mobility disabilities. People with specific learning disabilities are also finding that they can no longer access web pages audibly with screen readers. Even people with cognitive disabilities are becoming lost due to the absence of navigation elements at web sites. Moreover, people with hearing disabilities cannot access the content of audiostreaming and videoclips posted in the Internet due to the absence of captioning.* [6]

The Internet environment must accommodate the functionality needs of accessible design. This accessibility enables CD and videotapes to be archived through captioning and enables electronic textbooks. I should add that even people without literacy skills can access the Internet by listening to screen-readers audibly reading the web. This is a challenge for the VET system not only in how it constructs its own Web-sites, which Internet Service Providers it chooses or the web-based platforms its uses but also in how it builds on line learning content and applications.

Increasing levels of education positively influence access, Web use, PC ownership and PC access at work. We must redouble our efforts to provide access to information and communications technologies for all if we are serious about providing educational opportunities to all.

AUSTRALIAN CULTURAL IDENTITY

Only vaguely do we understand the dangers to Australian cultural identity from globalisation. Many Western nations are concerned that globalisation equals Americanisation. Many non-Western cultures fear that globalisation heralds a

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[6] Cynthia Waddell (1999), "The Growing Digital Divide in Access for People with Disabilities: Overcoming Barriers to Participation", paper to *Understanding the Digital Economy: Data, Tools and Research*, May 25-26, sponsored by US Department of Commerce URL: http://www.aasa.dshs.wa.gov/access/waddell.htm

Westernising world where Western values and mind-sets are assumed to be universal. A form of cultural imperialism in cyberspace.

This leads the entertainment industries, for example, to seek to create content and applications which reflect unique national identities. The French have been particularly active in this area, supporting French arts, films, language and literature from the seemingly all-pervasive American popular culture.

In Australia too there has been concern that the Australian identity and experience - the way we do and see things – is reflected in the cultural content we produce. Our own arts community argues for more *The Castle*, *Play School*, *Sea Change*, *Muriel's Wedding* and *Bran Nue Day* to challenge *Friends*, *CNN* and *Zena Woman Warrior*.

The Australian government recognised the problem in its *Strategic Framework for the Information Economy* when it identified as a priority the need to *…promote the integrity and growth of Australian content and culture in the information economy.*

My impression is that the response by VET to this priority has been, to say the least, slow. If VET moves beyond its current obsession with competencies and behaviourist approaches to vocational learning to consider this question of cultural content at all, it tends to think about the need to export Australian-owned content, rather than about the ways vocational teaching and learning derives from, expresses and influences Australian culture.

It is difficult to talk about Australian cultural identity in VET, because unlike the other educational sectors we don't imagine VET as an Australian cultural institution or as an institution contributing to the evolution of Australian culture. Unlike say, schooling, which would see itself along with other civil institutions such as the family or the community, as a forge of cultural identity, we imagine VET work far more narrowly – that it is simply about developing occupational technique. From this narrow view, we make assumptions that our teaching and learning is value free or even more blindly, culture-free.

But every teaching and learning choice we make is an expression of our cultural values. Teaching and learning materials express and reinforce those values which underpin what it means to be an Australian moving into the 21st century. The values of merit, a fair go, tolerance, environmental sustainability, gender equity and, above all, of cultural pluralism must be represented in our teaching and learning materials.

Each time we choose a link with another website, and every time we borrow from the global pool of online learning materials be it clip art, graphics, assessment instruments, text, sound, data, learning models or pedagogies, we are not just making technical choices, we are making cultural choices - we are presenting students with a world view structured in a particular way. The real question is whether we are consciously structuring a culturally pluralist, inclusive, tolerant and democratic world view consistent with the what we imagine to be the Australian way.

This is not a zenophobic argument for a kangaroo on every web page and the sound of kookaburras on each CD – a model which reduces the subtlety of the Australian identity

to tourism knick-knacks. It is not about making our learners citizens of fortress Australia. It is about VET practitioners understanding the cultural underpinning of their professional choices.

I have recently been reading some preliminary work by Donna Hoffman and Thomas Novak of Vanderbilt University on the relationship of race to access and usage over time. They raise a number of issues that we too must consider and I will mention just three here.

1) The need to understand the differences in Internet access use amongst different racial and ethnic groups

2) The need to understand cultural differences in search behaviour. General purpose search engines may not be compelling to particular cultural groups and culturally specific search engines are likely to emerge to fill the gap by 'mainstream' searchers and browsers.

3) The extent to which Internet material is sufficiently multicultural in orientation

In our rush to get the basic architecture of Internet use in place, we have assumed a cultural homogeneity and overlooked one of the central features of globalisation – greater pluralism.

Let me give an example of a home-grown problem. Recently I have been working on the Web looking at performance indicators for adult and community education. I did the usual search strategies and accumulated a really good range of material to work with, material from USA, UK, Canada and Finland.

It was only by accident, through a passing reference from NCVER, that I browsed an Indigenous Australian site which led me to another and another. Here was a rich vein of knowledge and understanding about adult and community education in Indigenous communities and how Indigenous communities thought about accountability and measurement. This subsequently informed my thinking about the general question of performance indicators.

Searching, I was struck by the large number of Indigenous sites and the value of what they contained. I was also struck by the fact that many of the standard Australian education and training sites had not thought about the value to them and to Indigenous learners of linking with Indigenous sites. The failure to choose such basic linkages presents Australia as a monocultural nation, renders invisible an important part of our community life and constructs a learning context which serves to exclude rather than include.

Australia is one of the great pluralist democracies of the world. This should be consciously reflected in how we do things in Australian VET as well as in the products and services we produce for national and international use. If not, we might as well simply download the British City and Guilds materials or Asymetrix from the United States and close up shop here. We would save money in the short term but the nation would be diminished as a result.

I think it is time that VET practitioners and the VET system exercised some national and international leadership by ensuring we adopt a pluralist approach in all that we do in developing vocational learning content and applications.

These two concerns – access and cultural identity – are the primary ways we currently think about the social implications of globalisation. Are there others? There is a third that I would like to deal with briefly today and that is the question of community.

COMMUNITY

VET accepts completely its responsibilities in helping Australia's enterprises and industries make a successful transition to the global economy. At some levels it accepts also its social responsibilities to help individuals make a similar transition to the new labour market for the new times. Does it have responsibilities beyond individuals and beyond enterprises to communities? I suggest the answer is yes.

The more we speak of the economic and technological implications of globalisation, the more we speak at the same time of community and communities. The management guru Peter Senge has suggested that when people have to go through a period of profound change, they cannot do it in isolation – they must do it together.

In this current transition to the Information Age, we have instinctively recognised the need to make the transition together. This recognition is reflected in the language used in education and in the wider community, if not yet in training. More and more this language is infused with words like 'community', 'community-building', 'regional communities', 'community resilience' 'social cohesion', 'inclusiveness' and the like. Community is not being used to refer only to geographic communities, but to encompass any group of individuals joined by common purpose.

As a side note to this, the *Strategic Framework for the Information Economy*, makes 31 references to communities and community (although it also makes 99 references to businesses and firms).

The idea of community is developing within the ranks of teachers, in suburbs, cities and towns, and within government at the same time that much attention is being paid to the concepts of civil society and social capital. The three ideas - community, civil society and social capital - are closely linked. They are conceptual devices through which we can discover important things about social life.[7] It helps us see things that may have been hidden or neglected in the past.

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[7] John Ehrenberg (1999), *Civil Society: The Critical History of an Idea*, New York University Press, New York, p.235

Social capital has emerged over the past decade to capture some of that which is missing from a world view dominated by economic and technological ideas.[8] It is best thought of as the raw material or fuel for a civil society. In her 1995 Boyer lecture, Eva Cox said:

> *There are four major capital measures, one of which takes up far too much policy time and space. This is financial capital. Physical capital makes it onto the agenda because of the environmental movement. So there are fierce debates on trees, water, coal and what constitutes sustainable development... We occasionally mention human capital – the total of our skills and knowledge but rarely count its loss in unemployment.*
>
> *There has been too little attention paid to social capital...Social capital refers to the processes between people which establish networks, norms, social trust and facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit. These processes are also known as social fabric or glue...*[9]

Social capital is embedded in relationships between people in both the interpersonal, one-to-one interactions and in interactions between groups. Its currency is trust.

Without exploring the concept in detail here, or highlighting its deficiencies, we can say that the idea of social capital has the potential to help families, communities, regions or nations respond to change. Its potential has been and is being explored by many, even the Prime Minister who convened a social capital round-table in 1998. It also has international resonance for both developed and developing countries. Even the World Bank has embraced the concept and has established a social capital unit.

Bullen and Onyx have reported on their research into social capital in five communities in NSW.[10] Their findings help give more precise meaning to the concept of social capital. They argue that there are eight distinct elements that appear to define social capital.

1. Four of the elements are about participation and connections in various arenas:
   i. Participation in local community
   ii. Neighbourhood Connections
   iii. Family and Friends Connections
   iv. Work Connections

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8 The term 'social capital' was first used in 1916 by Lyda Judson Hanifa to describe rural school community centres. It was revived in the 1980s by Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman. The concept however can be traced back to the 19th century and classical sociology.

9 Eva Cox (1995), *Boyer Lectures 1995*, Australian Broadcasting Commission, Sydney

10 Paul Bullen & Jenny Onyx with Neighbourhood and Community Centres (1998), "Measuring Social Capital in Five Communities in NSW: an Analysis", *Working Paper Series No 41*, Centre for Australian Community Organisations and Management, University of Technology Sydney

2. Four of the elements are the building blocks of social capital:
    v. Proactivity in a social context
    vi. Feelings of Trust and Safety
    vii. Tolerance of Diversity
    viii. Value of Life

Kilpatrick and Falk from the University of Tasmania have done recent research on how learning for farming can build social capital in communities, including agricultural communities. They have identified social capital resources used in one-to-one interactions as comprising knowledge resources and identity resources.[11]

Social Capital in Interactions Between Individuals

Knowledge Resources	Identity Resources
Knowledge of: • Networks internal and external to the community • Skills and knowledge available • Precedents, procedures and rules • Communication sites • Value/attitudinal attributes of the community.	Cognitive and affective attributes: • Self-confidence • Norms, values, attitudes • Vision • Trust • Commitment to community

Looking at these two pieces of research I wonder about the resources we are explicitly developing in VET learners and suggest that we have been too narrow in our thinking, too focussed on competency and not focussed enough on helping vocational learners develop multiple resources for working life, for community life and for active citizenship.

Even if we look no further than economics, social capital is necessary. Peter Drucker has argued that social capital (networks, shared norms, and trust), fostered through collaboration and alliances, may be as important as physical capital (plant, equipment, and technology), and human capital (intellect, character, education and training) in driving innovation and growth. We know that in the knowledge Age, innovation and value are more and more commonly generated in networks.

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11 Sue Kilpatrick & Ian Falk (1999), "Benefits for all: How learning for farming can build social capital in communities", Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia, University of Tasmania, URL: http://www.brs.gov.au/events/country/proceedings/falk.rtf

I also wonder what happens to social capital in a virtual environment. Is social capital reduced by online learning? Can social capital be developed through virtual communities? Can online learning help build social capital? Should it?

Talking about big ideas such as social capital in VET is not easy or comfortable. The language of VET has become so instrumental, so pragmatic, so arid, so defined by what is acceptable to stakeholders as to exclude opportunities to explore new social concepts or to explore the social dimension of VET in any new way. Safer to talk about employer subsidies, auditing the ARF, restructures, better performance measurement, Training Packages.

But an essential feature of globalisation is the need for risk-taking. This means not simply handling investment risk in areas such as online learning or new learning technologies, but taking risks by thinking new thoughts and thinking in new ways for the new times.

I want to encourage VET practitioners – VET leaders - to challenge the dominant and approved way of thinking and doing VET things. To borrow a phrase from the Chairman of Lend Lease, who is also Chairman of the Australian National Training Authority, *dare to be different*.

This brief overview of concepts of community and social capital is intended to raise the practical question of our role in building virtual communities between and amongst VET staff and industry and, more importantly, amongst VET students.

Virtual communities are communities of people who are linked together through the Internet through a common interest, industry, profession or background. The most readily identifiable virtual communities are academic and scientific communities which formed through initial use of the Internet in the 1970s.

Marketing has understood the power of virtual communities which they see in terms of generating traffic, concentrating traffic and locking in traffic to generate commercial revenue. And we too in VET could do a far better job of building virtual communities for marketing our products and services.

But I am talking about a different purpose – a community-building purpose for VET, a way of enhancing the stock of social capital in our communities. A way of meeting learner needs for belonging, for community.

We need to be cautious in considering claims about social capital and about how electronic networks can help in the community-building process. Much of the debate is hopelessly romantic and utopian, drawing on the particular historical, political and cultural circumstances of the United States. Nevertheless, I share the view of many observers such as Scott London who makes a case for how

> *...electronic networks, especially when augmented by face-to-face networks, can strengthen communities by serving as "free spaces," by fostering dialogue*

and deliberation, and by enhancing the bonds of trust, reciprocity and connectedness that make up social capital.[12]

Technology does not create community, in fact it often works to break down traditional social bonds. Nevertheless, electronic networks which build on existing social networks can make an important contribution to balancing some of the economic, political and technological consequences of globalisation.

I think that the VET system and VET practitioners need to focus more on their role in building strongly democratic and empowering virtual communities and on accelerating the processes by which they do so.

CONCLUSION

In the first of the BBC Reith Lectures, Anthony Giddens has argued that globalisation is not incidental to our lives today – it is the way we now live.[13] He says:

> *Everywhere we look, we see institutions that appear the same as they used to be from the outside, and carry the same names, but inside have become quite different. We continue to talk of the nation, the family, work, tradition, nature as if they were all the same as in the past. They are not. The outer shell remains, but inside all is different...They are what I call shell institutions...institutions that have become inadequate to the tasks they are called upon to perform.14*

Imagine we have a shell institution called VET that, because of the processes of globalisation, is no longer adequate to the task it has been set by government, industry, communities and individual learners. How might we go about re-inventing it?

Flexible learning is the name we have given to our re-invention. Obviously we must continue to place a strong emphasis on economic and technological aspects of flexible learning. But without a social and political perspective, what we build inside the shell will remain inadequate to the task.

As leaders in VET. I think we are smarter than that.

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12 Scott London (1997), "Civic Networks. Building Community on the Net". URL: http://www.west.net/~insigt/london/networks.htm

13 Anthony Giddens (1999), *Runaway World*, Lecture 1, Reith Lectures 1999, BBC London URL:http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/emglish/statis/events/reith_99/default.htm

14 Anthony Giddens (1999), ibid